

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

20 November 1984

Iraq: The Quest for US ArmsSummary

Iraq likely will probe the limits of US arms sales policies once full diplomatic relations are restored. Baghdad, believing that the US will not sell it any major weapons directly, will try to purchase weapons produced under US license from third countries, particularly artillery from South Korea. Baghdad also will try to step up direct purchases from US firms of military support equipment and civilian gear--particularly helicopters--that can be modified for combat. Iraq will use such military and civilian purchases to attempt to tie the US more closely to Iraq. [redacted]

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Since Iraq does not need US arms to continue fighting, Baghdad will interpret Washington's response to its requests in political rather than military terms. Indeed, Iraq is likely to view US provision of commercial credits, continued squeezing of arms supplies to Iran, and encouragement of West European and Gulf Arab support for Iraq as more important than the arms relationship. [redacted]

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This paper was prepared by [redacted] the Persian Gulf Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division, NESA [redacted]

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The war with Iran has provided Iraq with an excellent opportunity to compare US and Soviet equipment. The Iraqis have found certain categories of US equipment--including fighter aircraft, helicopters, artillery, antitank missiles, and support gear--to be superior. In addition, Iraqi forces have captured several hundred US armored vehicles and artillery pieces, at least one or two helicopters in working condition, TOW antitank missiles, approximately 100 Hawk surface-to-air missiles, and large quantities of support equipment. Iraq has equipped several small units with captured US artillery and TOW missiles and has used these weapons against Iranian forces. [REDACTED]

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Based on the good performance of many US weapons, Iraq has sought, and in several cases successfully acquired, US equipment during the war. In the most noteworthy case, Iraq tried to acquire Hughes 500 MD antitank helicopters through South Korea. The deal was blocked by the US, but the Iraqis were able to purchase a civilian version of the Hughes helicopter directly from the American manufacturer that they turned over to the Iraqi Army Aviation Command. In addition, the Iraqis are arranging for the French to install military aiming systems with laser rangefinders on at least some of the Hughes helicopters. [REDACTED]

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The Iraqis also have devoted considerable effort to acquiring US 175mm and 155mm artillery pieces and Cobra helicopter gunships armed with TOW antitank missiles. Iraq has had no success acquiring the 175mm artillery or Cobra gunships, nor was it successful in arranging deals for US laser guided bombs and C-130 transport aircraft. Baghdad, however, apparently has obtained some US electronic equipment and minor support gear for use in military operations. [REDACTED]

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Testing US Arms Export Policy

The Iraqis are likely to seek more US arms once full diplomatic relations are restored, but they do not need additional military equipment to stave off the Iranians. They have at least a six-to-one advantage in operational combat aircraft and approximately a seven-to-one advantage in armored vehicles. Instead, the Iraqis are likely to view US willingness to supply arms as a gauge to judge how fast and deep Washington wants to develop relations. [REDACTED]

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The Iraqis also are likely to use arms--and commercial--purchases as a means to link the US more closely to Iraq and prevent any major US moves toward Iran. Baghdad appears to be pursuing this tactic with several third world countries it suspects are selling weapons to Iran. First Iraq makes large arms purchases and then subtly pressures the supplier to break its connections with the Iranians. Iraq is trying this tactic with Argentina and unsuccessfully attempted it with North Korea this summer. [REDACTED]

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Particular Items of Equipment

Iraq likely will be interested in the following types of military equipment:

-- spare parts for US equipment already in the Iraqi inventory;

- logistic and support equipment from US manufacturers such as trucks, radios, radars, night vision devices, electronic gear, and machinery for arms manufacturing plants;
- combat gear, or civilian equipment that can be modified for combat use, such as helicopters, artillery, and armored personnel carriers.

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Baghdad likely realizes, based on its experiences so far in trying to acquire US weapons, that Washington will not supply any major combat gear directly. Baghdad probably will press initially for a loosening of controls on the export of weapons produced under US license by third countries.

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Earlier in the war, Iraq sought to purchase from South Korea approximately 100 M-114 155mm howitzers, 20 M-101 105mm howitzers, and some breechblock assemblies for captured US artillery. Baghdad is likely to try to purchase 300-400 artillery pieces and ammunition from South Korea over the next few years as part of a major on-going expansion and upgrade of its artillery forces.

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Iraq also has attempted to purchase other types of US military equipment from South Korea during the war. It may press for a loosening of US controls over these items as well, including:

- AN/PRC-77 radios,
- Vulcan anti-aircraft guns,
- industrial equipment for use in Iraqi arms factories to produce artillery and ammunition.

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The Iraqis will probe for US willingness to supply low-profile items directly. Baghdad may be particularly interested in trying to acquire spare parts for equipment it has captured from Iran. They probably will be seeking spares for 175mm guns, TOW antitank missile launchers and missiles (Iraq has acquired some TOW spares from Jordan), and HAWK missile equipment. If the US is unwilling to sell directly, the Iraqis likely will suggest a loosening of US restrictions on third country transfers, particularly from Egypt and Jordan.

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Baghdad also likely will attempt to determine Washington's position on the direct supply of logistic and support equipment. Baghdad is trying to arrange the purchase of 24 Bell 214 helicopters and 800-1000 M-809 heavy duty trucks from US firms. The Iraqis will expect the US government to back the sales. Iraq also has begun talks with a US manufacturer for armored trench diggers.

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Finally, Iraq has invested over a billion dollars in its domestic arms industry and probably will look for US computers and industrial machinery that can be used in arms production.

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There are certain US weapon systems that have so impressed the Iraqis during the war that we believe they will raise the possibility of direct or indirect purchases with US officials. These include:

- Cobra helicopter gunships. Iraqi Army Aviation officers want to establish links to the US military and they have been very impressed with the Cobra, which they have nicknamed "the ghost of death."
- 175mm artillery pieces. The Iraqis value the range and destructive power of this weapon, which they call "the widowmaker."
- M-113 armored personnel carriers. The Iraqis had 150 of these APCs prior to the war and have been impressed with its mechanical reliability. They are trying to purchase Italian variants of this vehicle.
- fighter aircraft. We believe the Iraqis realize the US will not supply fighter aircraft, but they may be interested in aircraft avionics and transport aircraft.

The Iraqis probably believe they are unlikely to receive major weapons directly from the US. Moreover, Baghdad would be unwilling to subject itself to the publicity surrounding the submission of requests for these weapons to Congress. [REDACTED]

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Implications for the US

Because Iraq does not need US equipment to maintain its war effort, the US position on arms sales will be interpreted by Baghdad in political rather than military terms. US willingness to allow some third country transfers or the supply of support items by US firms will be viewed as a clear signal that the US wants to deepen the relationship. A firm US stand to restrict direct or indirect exports of US equipment will be viewed as a sign that the US desires to "freeze" any military relationship for the time being. Iraqi leaders, however, will view military deals as only one part of a much larger relationship. The provision of US commercial credits, Washington's willingness to continue squeezing Iranian arms supplies, and US efforts to press West European and Gulf Arab states to be responsive to Iraqi financial needs will be viewed by Baghdad as far more important than the arms relationship. [REDACTED]

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Even if the US is relatively forthcoming on arms supplies, Baghdad will not allow the US much access to the Iraqi military. The Iraqi regime is intensely nationalistic and suspicious of outsiders. Even Soviet advisers in Iraq are closely monitored by the security services and most are not really advisers but maintenance technicians. The Iraqis likely will send only a few military personnel to the US for training and then use them to instruct other Iraqi military personnel in Iraq. Baghdad realizes that this will lessen the effectiveness of training programs but it is willing to make that trade-off in order to maintain tight security. [REDACTED]

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SUBJECT: IRAQ: THE QUEST FOR US ARMS

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